



Unions, Graffiti and Utility Boxes

Posted by **Pierluigi Oliverio** on Monday, December 14, 2009

Last Tuesday at the council meeting, we spent approximately 90 minutes discussing the Teamsters Union at the Convention Center. Long story-short, this is a labor dispute between two different union locals that will be settled by the National Labor Relations Board. However, in the meantime, the Convention Center (which is the largest source of the City's hotel tax receipts and drives airport traffic) is getting negative PR which is affecting prospective convention business in San Jose.

Whether it's one union local or another, the fact is the Teamster jobs are taxpayer subsidized jobs since the City owns and operates the Convention Center where they work. When everyone chooses to fight as we are then we slit our own throats, since the taxpayer is on the hook for the annual subsidy—which will grow if we are unable to book convention business.

Last Wednesday, at the Neighborhood Services committee, there was an update on the anti-graffiti program. The City painted over 100,000-plus graffiti tags last fiscal year. The City is meeting its goal of removing gang graffiti in 24 hours, although the staff is resource-constrained.

Also related to graffiti was the annual year-in-review by the San Jose Downtown Association last Friday morning. At the meeting, they spoke about the success of the Groundwerx crew that is privately funded by a Property Business Improvement District. Groundwerx spends much of its efforts cleaning Downtown, with an emphasis on graffiti. I think it would be great if a judge (who presides over graffiti taggers) made those offenders do community service with Groundwerx to help clean Downtown for days/weeks/months, rather than the small penalties today.

One particular challenge with graffiti are the utility boxes that are all around our city. These boxes are privately owned by the likes of ATT, Comcast, PG&E., etc. The graffiti bozo's (with the City lacking

Singapore-style punishment) constantly mark up the boxes with their tags or gang tags. The committee discussed the possibility of creating an ordinance that would remove graffiti from those utility boxes asap. Ideally, we would not need an ordinance as the utility companies would clean it up themselves in a timely manner; unfortunately, that does not happen. So one way we could ensure that the companies would understand the importance of taking care of the property in San Jose is to adopt and execute a fine to the utility companies for any graffiti left on a box for more then 72 hours. Or they could contract with the City to pay us each time we clean up the tag.

The big vote this week in front of the Council is whether or not to give direction to city attorney to make binding arbitration for police and fire open to the public. The arbitrator who does not reside in San Jose makes binding decisions on police and fire contracts but is not accountable to the taxpayers. Yet the arbitrator has the power to force the city to spend unlimited amount of tax dollars. Not even the Mayor or a Councilmember is allowed to hear what is said. I bet you can already predict the votes as the last vote to make union negotiations public was 3-8, with the «no» votes prevailing.

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